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## INTRODUCTION



Poetry is personal. The poet tells us about love, grief, faith, doubt, fear or courage as they have felt it, and a receptive reader – sometimes centuries later – discovers that the verses strike a chord, and that scraps of the poem catch in their memory for ever. Any anthology of best-loved poems must, therefore, open with a sincere apology for omissions. Our unique private canon will be influenced by our age, our friends and families, our schooling and all our triumphs and tribulations, so it would be impossible to include everyone's favourites within these covers. Some longer poems have been cut due to limited space, but I hope the lines included give a flavour of the whole work and will inspire readers to seek out and savour the full texts.

We soak up poetry from our very earliest days. My three-year-old daughter already has a mental storehouse replete with nursery verses and rhyming stories, and as a result is acquainted with a host of characters from Bo Peep, through the Owl and the Pussy-Cat, to the Gruffalo. (Woe betide me if I attempt to skip a few lines in order to hasten bedtime – she is word perfect.) At the other end of life, people often

retain fragments of favourite poems even when other memories become elusive. Poetry is successfully used as a therapeutic tool to unlock emotions and recollections in patients with dementia. Since we carry our favourite verses all our lives, I hope that any unfamiliar works included here will become new treasures to be enjoyed and stored.

This anthology is divided thematically so that readers can find a poem to suit any mood, though there is of course some fluidity in the categories. One of the beauties of poetry is its ability to address – often in just a handful of words – numerous big questions and passions at once. Blake and Hopkins find God in the contemplation of birds and beasts, for example, and Shelley sees his desire for his lover reflected in every corner of the natural world.

As readers we take comfort in knowing we are not alone in our struggles, and thrill to find words that express – more clearly and beautifully than we ever could – our joys. In a frenetic digital world it is a pure and restorative pleasure to sit for a few minutes with a poem, to chew and swallow its syllables slowly by reading it aloud, giving ourselves time to digest its language and rhythm as well as its truth. Poetry can connect us to others and to our own emotions in a profound and valuable way that we need now more than ever in a hyper-connected world that can feel superficial. It has been a privilege and indulgence to spend time seeking out these poems, and I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as I have.